Chapter 8
Education and Feminist Studies

Feminism is of itself an educational project. When feminist activists in the early 1970s questioned the status quo, they began to unpick their own socialisation, read against the grain, challenge hegemonies, and reconstruct the world from women’s own perspectives. Early initiatives in feminist studies tended to be based in voluntarily run women’s centres, or located within small networks of friends who set up reading groups and consciousness-raising groups, or as they were called in the USA “rap groups”, where a group of women would come together to “rap”, or discuss, a particular issue. Women’s studies came together in a similar way, as collectives were set up “where each woman agrees to share the responsibility for planning the course, initiating discussion, gathering material and ensuring that every member gets her fair chance to participate” (Steiner-Scott, 1985: 286). For Steiner-Scott, women’s studies programmes emerged as “informal groups, that is, those organised outside of traditional educational structures”.

As interest grew, groups were set up in more formal ways, such as the “Women in Learning” group in Dublin. A flyer from the group stated:
WIL is a women’s studies group set up by women from diverse areas of interest. All the women express dissatisfaction with the education system and its failure to meet the needs of women. WIL women … do not simply want to “put on” courses, but also want to learn for themselves and seek out alternative possibilities for education for women … our own experiences as women will be seen as relevant to courses – unlike usual academic courses – where only male-defined experiences are seen as valid – all others are rejected as “personal” and “irrelevant”.

Two of the courses listed by WIL were “Our Bodies Ourselves” and “Women and Children First”. WIL was committed to a policy of facilitating women learners, as is evident from the postscript to its flyer: “n.b. if you have any problems, i.e. financial/bringing children along etc. please let us know and we will do whatever we can to help you sort them out”. It clearly saw itself as part of the feminist movement at the time, and talk about “working in co-operation with other groups and sharing resources and ideas”.

From the early 1980s on, women’s education projects began to develop throughout the country, many of them as part of broader adult and community education programmes, but some also developed independently by local women’s groups.

Apart from course-oriented learning, it is clear that those women in a position to travel to the various feminist conferences could avail of the opportunity to network with other women from all over the country. This list of women’s conferences was drawn up for the IFI Diary and Guidebook 1985, and gives an indication of the number of such events held in the late 1970s:

- 2 Feb 1975 International Women’s Year held in Dublin
- 19 Mar 1976 International Women’s Day Meeting
- 27 Jan 1978 2nd National Women’s Liberation Conference
- 15 May 1978 Conference on Lesbianism in Dublin
- 25 May 1978 Galway National Women’s Conference on Violence
- October 1978 3rd National Women’s Liberation Conference Belfast
- 9 June 1979 All Ireland Women’s Conference Dublin
- 18 June 1983 Women’s Conference, Crescent Arts Centre Belfast
- 6 April 1984 National Women’s Conference – Rutland St. Dublin

These conferences provided a forum for women to learn and to develop feminist practice in workshop sessions. A review of the National Women’s Liberation Conference held in Belfast in 1978 reinforces this point:

I didn’t know there were so many Feminists in Ireland. Didn’t know that it was possible to spend a weekend at a conference with over 100 women from all over the country and take as assumed ideas that I usually have to defend vigorously… The way the conference operated was, for me, one of its most interesting aspects. It was part of the attempt by the Women’s Movement to
develop a new way of organising and discussing … We used small workshops with about 10 women in each as the basis of the conference. (Anima Rising Galway Women’s Collective newsletter 1978 (BL/F/AP/1139/17, Attic Press Archive)

The introduction of small group workshops, now a central feature of much education and development work, derived from the small-group consciousness-raising elements of the women’s movement. More recent initiatives in feminist learning have adopted the same approach. For example, the Lesbian Education and Awareness/NOW programme in the late 1990s provided training for a group of members of lesbian communities from various parts of the country, with the aim that this trained group of women would then pass on the skills and training they had learned to members of their own organisations. During the programme, an information and resource pack was produced, which continues to be used in a variety of educational settings throughout the country, both within the LGBT communities, and the wider community.

Other less formal ways in which feminists developed their own learning programmes included reading groups and women’s libraries, such as the library in the Women’s Space at the Quay Co-Op in Cork, and the Women’s Centre Shop at 27 Temple Lane, Dublin. Women’s centres like these carried catalogues from the women’s presses, as well as making available a wide range of feminist reading material. The Women’s Library in Cork published a newsletter, which reviewed new books and articles relevant to their readership. Making a wide range of materials available either on loan or at reduced second-hand prices made feminist theories and publications accessible to a wider number of people.

Materials found in the libraries and bookshops included periodicals such as Banshee and Spare Rib, as well as pamphlets and books relating to a wide range of political and social issues. Pamphlets on women’s health matters, including abortion, were also made available cheaply or on loan. Much of this material was imported from abroad, which is an interesting comment on the thinking and ideologies of early Irish feminism, as we discussed earlier. Underlining this point, Róisín Conroy points out in the preface to a bibliography on “Images of Irish Women”:

Although I was asked to compile a bibliography dealing with the subject of women in Ireland, I found that there is such a dearth of Irish material, both factual and theoretical, on topics such as Health and Sexuality that the “Irish only” criteria has little or no relevance. Much of the theory, certainly, that has influenced Irishwomen has been written and published abroad. (Crane Bag 4.1 1980)

The establishment of women’s studies programmes and centres over the intervening twenty years would change this, and ensure that Irish feminists would begin to publish and read Irish material. In a 1987 paper, Ailbhe Smyth drew attention to the need for women’s studies programmes which would be culturally and socially specific, and pointed up two key issues for women’s studies in Ireland, stating that it should:
Poster advertising the Women’s World Congress held in Dublin, 1987 (BL/F/AP/982/4, Attic Press Archive)
(a) maintain and develop its relationship with the women’s movement; its usefulness and accessibility to all women; create dialogue between researchers and teachers, and institutional and non-institutional programmes and activities;

(b) bring about irreversible change in the ways in which knowledge is constructed and disseminated – in research policies, agendas and methodologies, in curriculum content and pedagogy.

(Quoted from a paper by Ailbhe Smyth, “The Emergence and Development of the Women’s Movement in Ireland”, held in BL/F/AP/1414/26, Attic Press Archive)

Women’s Studies and the Academy

The establishment of a women’s studies programme at Trinity College Dublin in 1983 and the Women’s Studies Forum at University College Dublin in 1987 marked the beginning of a new era in Irish feminist education. Both were integral to the establishment and wider acceptance of women’s studies in the Irish third-level education system.

The Women’s Studies Forum at ucd was a collective which organised academic events, rather than a series of taught programmes. Reflecting on this group, Smyth describes it as: “a space for discussion and exchange, between women in the university, and between women in the university and the community.” The Women’s Education, Research and Resource Centre (we r c) was founded in ucd in 1990, and although it initially operated out of a tiny administrative office in the library building, and had no full-time staff members, the enthusiasm for the project of women’s studies was infectious.

Byrne et al (1996) document the experience in University College Galway. In 1987 a group of students, academics and administrative staff collectively voiced
their concern about the lack of attention to gender issues within ucg. They highlighted the deficiency of women's studies courses on the undergraduate academic curriculum and the absence of equality policies in the workplace. The ucg Women's Studies Centre was established in order to promote contact between staff and students with an interest in these issues and to provide a forum in which to engage in discussion, exchange information and be a source of collective support.  

Looking at the development of women's studies in the intervening period, Pat O’Connor points out:

By the early 1990s, there were approximately 40 Women's Studies courses in existence (Drew, 1993; Ní Charthaigh and Hanafin, 1993) with all the universities in Ireland having Women's Studies at undergraduate and/or postgraduate level … At its best … the existence and vitality of Women's Studies is a radical challenge to the structure and ethos of these institutions. (O’Connor, 1998: 77)

Early women's studies groups in universities discussed the tensions that might arise in the effort to locate the teachings of an activist movement in a traditional academic setting. At a women's studies conference in San Francisco in 1988, Smyth addressed the question of the relationship between the women's movement and women's studies, pointing out that the women's movement was by then becoming more diffuse, and that many of the women coming to women's studies might have no history of activism. She saw this as a challenge for women's studies educators, as they endeavoured to maintain a basis of political activism in their teaching and research. Describing the way in which Irish universities in Ireland in the 1980s were often cut off from the wider community, she emphasised the importance of accessibility and links with community groups. In 1995, Byrne reflected back on these concerns:

The earlier debates in the women's movement concerned the threat of deradicalisation of women's studies once it became a component in the formal educational system, as carried out by gendered institutions, such as universities. Women's studies has struggled with the dilemma of becoming part of the institution so that the feminist agenda of empowerment and liberation can be carried out within the walls, while at the same time seeking to change the very institution which provides a home for academic feminism. (Byrne, 1995: 26–27)

Thus, it is clear that many members of women's studies projects see the political and educational goals of women's studies as organically linked to the history and aims of the women’s movement:

Establishing women's studies in educational institutions embraces many issues: the production of feminist scholarship, developing feminist research methodologies, creating teaching programmes, curricula and feminist media, liaising and negotiating with institutional bodies and committees, setting up Women's Studies centres and departments, looking for long-term funding, negotiating research contracts, networking and liaising with women's groups, providing
support for campaigns and social and political issues. And as the work develops, the list of activities grows. (Byrne, 1995: 26–27)

A more recent development is that for some women in “mainstream” academic departments, “gender studies” have become part of their career trajectory, an area which women are simply expected to teach. For some, a theoretical focus on activist political movements such as the feminist movement is one which tends to be kept at an “objective” remove. The danger here is that teaching feminist studies can become just another aspect of academic specialisation, with no investment in the political or social implications of feminist politics. In contrast, those working on dedicated women’s studies programmes tend to see feminism within academe as a form of activism, of institutional and scholarly resistance.¹

Many women’s studies programmes in Ireland operate within the university structure, and are for the most part under-resourced and voluntarily maintained (Connolly, 2003b). Smyth addresses the difficulties posed to women’s studies, and a range of other non-traditional subjects, by the compartmentalisation of academic departments:

If you want to do regional studies, or Women’s Studies, or Equality Studies, or if you want to move in a pluridisciplinary or cross-disciplinary way it’s incredibly difficult because this is seen as being totally subversive … so it is structurally very difficult to do something like Women’s
Women’s Liberation Conference 9 September 1979, Trinity College Dublin, where the decision to form the 32 County Feminist Federation was taken (photo: Clodagh Boyd)

“Reflections on the Irish Women’s Movement” panel, Women’s World Congress, Dublin, 7 July 1987 (photo: Clodagh Boyd)
Some titles from the LIP series of feminist pamphlets published by Attic Press
Roseneil makes some pertinent observations on the propensity of many feminist academics to move continuously between and across the boundaries of their own discipline and women's studies. She points out that they teach mainstream courses that are compulsory elements of undergraduate and postgraduate disciplines and in addition they teach, in a relatively autonomous way, option courses within their disciplines and within women's studies programmes (1995: 191–205). Roseneil contends that the integration/separation tension results partly from the location of feminism at the margins of mainstream academe and the fact that few lectureships are appointed entirely within women’s studies.

A recent funding intervention on the part of an Irish-American trust has enabled some women’s studies centres to move away from their dependence on support from within the academy. This external funding has altered the status of women’s studies departments and staff at NUI and the University of Limerick (UL), among others, where full-time posts have been funded on an interim basis. However, this funding is contingent on the host university agreeing to maintain such posts at the end of a fixed period of time, and this has meant that some women’s studies departments have not been able to avail of the funding, in the absence of institutional backing. Thus, while it is possible to say that funding ini-
tiatives have altered the situation for some women's studies centres, the overall picture is still one of voluntary management and teaching across the field of Irish women's studies.

Today, a wide variety of themes and experiences underpin the remit of women's studies, which is not exclusively confined to academe. Women's studies are undertaken in a variety of contexts, particularly in adult and community education settings. Outreach programmes are maintained by several university-based women's studies centres, with students based in a variety of communities. These courses are run in co-operation with community projects; for example, wer rc has developed links with groups such as the saol Project, Ballymun Women's Resource Centre and 1 Inc. Through its methods, based on principles of consciousness raising and empowerment, Irish women's studies seek to validate knowledge through women's experiences both within and outside of the walls of the university.

**Women's Community Education**

Smyth's programme for women's studies mentioned earlier, called on feminist educators to maintain and develop a relationship with the women's movement, and to maintain the usefulness and accessibility of women's studies to all women (1987). Bred Connolly describes locally based feminist activism as: “the engagement of ordinary women with the Women's Movement, extending the ownership of the movement from purely academic and public arenas, into the everyday lives of ordinary women” (2002). The impetus for women's community education in this country has come from locally based women's groups, as discussed in the previous chapter, often working in tandem with larger organisations, such as Aontas, nui Maynooth's Adult and Community Education Centre, wer rc, the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ica), local vecs and others. Thus, the issues and concerns of locally based women's groups are inextricably linked with community education carried out in their areas. Access to continuing education has long been highlighted as an issue for locally based women's groups, which see the provision of ongoing education for women as a way to counter women's isolation from each other, and to build community identities. Community education has also moved into the arena of accredited education and training programmes, as a strategy to break the cycle of disadvantage as well as to develop tools to challenge/disrupt the *status quo*.

Daytime education courses began to spring up in the mid-1980s, run by groups such as Clondalkin Adult Morning Education (came), Maynooth Adult Daytime Courses (made) and the Churchfield Women's Group in Cork. By the early 1990s there were over 100 such groups. Connolly and Ryan (2000) outline the development of daytime education groups in the greater Dublin area. They point out that community-based courses in the 1980s were run by group members themselves, who took on the responsibility for organising childcare facilities, employing tutors and, most importantly, selecting the subjects for study. Women's studies were one of the early components of many of these courses, as local groups began to address
Women's Education Group (BL/F/AP/1129/1, Attic Press Archive) (n.d.)
Doing It For Themselves

Over the past ten years, working class women have become increasingly active in education, and in personal and community development. Kathleen Maher reports on a recent initiative in Dublin.

Prior to the 1980s most women in working class communities spent their time isolated in their homes looking after their families. Apart from this, women spent a considerable amount of time queuing for basic services such as welfare, bringing their children to school, shopping, waiting for buses, in fact doing everything except stopping for a moment to look after their own needs as women and human beings.

Article by Kathleen Maher in the Irish Reporter 8 (1992)

Heading from an article by Churchfield Women's Group on women's rights and gay rights, Quare Times, spring 1984 (Irish Queer Archive)
the kinds of learning simultaneously being introduced by feminists in the academy. The parallels between this way of organising local women’s studies courses and the efforts of early feminist activists working out of women’s centres are clear. However, unlike the pioneers of earlier feminist education initiatives who were devising materials from scratch, locally based groups in the late 1980s could draw on the body of feminist material which had emerged during the earlier activist period, together with radical social theories which they adapted for Irish community contexts.

We tend to think of women’s community education as a field whose primary investment is in urban working-class women’s community development and activism. However, this is not uniformly the case. In itself, extrapolating the differences between adult education, community education and lifelong learning is by no means straightforward. Today, the number and range of courses available (some of which have roots in external educational institutions, are community-led, are accredited by external bodies, or are not accredited at all) does not lend itself to an easy analysis, or an overall picture of this field. This leads to difficulties
in assessing the investment in feminist principles across a wide range of groups and courses categorised as “women’s community education”. For example, at least one-fifth of the 1,000 groups currently listed under the heading “women’s community education” are connected with the Home-School Liaison system, which is rooted in the needs of the school system rather than the self-defined needs of the groups, or the (mostly women) members involved (Ní Dhubhda, 2002: 54).

One of the persistent questions thrown up by community activists and practitioners of women’s community education is that of an interrogation of class structures within feminism. Noting the increasing numbers of women in working-class communities who participated in community education courses in the 1980s and 1990s, the Cork Women’s Education Initiative (CWEI) points out that much of the material covered in such courses has a particular class bias:

Most of these [courses] have focused on hobby activities or personal development and assertiveness. Almost all have been very individualistic – emphasising how women can change themselves, rather than looking both at the structures that keep women in their place and ways
to challenge these structures collectively. Feminism may have been sometimes included, but issues around class were rarely considered relevant to working class women’s lives. (1998)

While it is crucial that the class bias of feminist studies is continually scrutinised, such an assessment of the personal-development activities and, consequently, the politicising effects of locally based women’s groups, requires further examination. Arguably, consciousness raising is an equally necessary strategy to that of challenging state structures in tackling women’s disempowerment. Social change also operates at a cultural level, through activities such as personal-development courses and second-chance education. Thus, raising the consciousness of a wider constituency of women who do not have the resources, childcare and time for other activist or community development work is also a critical element of feminist empowerment. As Anne B. Ryan (2001) has argued, personal development is important in women’s community education; but it needs to be grounded in feminist principles rather than relying on mainstream psychology.
In the period 1993 to 2003, the number of women’s community education groups has increased tenfold (Inglis et al, 1993; wer r c/Aontas, 2001: 27). European funding initiatives in the 1990s such as New Opportunities for Women (now), and the Women’s Educational Network Development Initiative (wendi), alongside community development initiatives at local level, have been instrumental in the growth of this sector. Yet, from the perspective of the wider educational picture, this is still a field which receives little attention or resources. The wer r c/Aontas report *At the Forefront* (2001) isolates the lack of childcare and transport support as being among the most significant barriers to women’s participation in continuing education. In the absence of core funding in this area, the availability of premises for daytime courses continues to pose problems.

New challenges are posed by the entry of feminist or community-focused courses into the mainstream provision of Adult Education. Ní Dhubhda (2002) refers to the dangers of a “mainstreaming without meaning, or a meaning radically altered but unacknowledged”:

*Banúlacht Handbook for Community Trainers (1994)*
At local, community and formal sites of learning, there are an ever-increasing range of courses with the tag “community”, or “women’s”, or both. But just because courses are run specifically for women, are located in a community, or are part of third-level compensatory models of Adult Education, this does not make them women’s community education. This education model is not based on the recipe “add and stir”. We need to keep reclaiming the right to be political, not just popular. (Ní Dhubhda, 2002: 61)

 Nonetheless, despite the continuing challenges presented to educators within women’s community education, it is clear that this is an area of education that is going from strength to strength. Furthermore, those coming through these programmes are now in a position to critically challenge power structures in the public domain:

 The slow, gradual, but very significant changes made in areas such as education under female ministers, the activities of women active in community groups, in adult education, and in voluntary organisations have created a supportive infrastructure or “submerged networks” (Melucci, 1998:248).

 They have generated an informed woman-centred constituency. (Mahon, 1995: 704)

 Mahon refers to the strength of this lobby in mainstream political terms, recently reflected in the effect of this constituency in the elections of women politicians such as Marion Harkin and others, who may not be specifically feminist candidates but whose agendas resonate in some ways with women voters.

*The Irish Journal of Feminist Studies 2003; 1996*
Aontas, the National Association of Adult Education, is a voluntary organisation which promotes and develops accessible adult learning.
Conclusion

Today, there are many ongoing links between women’s community education and women’s studies programmes, and several useful alliances have been developed on the ground between locally based women’s groups and university departments. The recognition that feminism can be expressed as activism within the institutions, as well as within the wider society, is central. This is specifically the case within academe, where feminists work collectively to challenge institutional and academic values, or improve conditions on behalf of women colleagues and students. Furthermore, the growing number of community-based feminist activists and development workers participating in third-level courses as learners, educators and researchers has enhanced the links between community-based and academic feminism. Cathleen O’Neill has underlined the importance of such cooperation between different kinds of groups:

The Irish Women’s Studies Reader (1993) was published by Attic Press to provide a foundation text in Irish feminism for use in women’s studies classrooms.
The women’s movement has been the most important movement of this century and it has been crucial to my life and development. It has been instrumental in the development of community-led women’s groups. To quote Mary Robinson, there is a “shared leadership, and a quite, radical, continuing dialogue between the individual woman and the collective women”. I believe that we need a more active dialogue that will question where the women’s movement is going; and we need to set and agree our priorities for the new millennium. There is a huge need to develop a cohesive co-ordinated women’s movement because there is much work to be done. (O’Neill, 1999: 42)

Despite these intersections, there remains a tendency to view the academy and community sectors within feminism and other activism as distinct camps with nothing to offer each other. As discussed in Chapter 7, existing research has provided valuable insights into clear divergences between feminist goals and activities of locally based women’s group (Ward and O’Donovan, 1996; Costello, 1999). Yet, there are also numerous examples of positive co-operation between women’s studies programmes and community groups. A national study of the experience of women involved both in academic women’s studies and women’s community education would be helpful in enabling an overall picture, and in furthering co-operative work.
Notes

1 See File BL/F/AP/1176, Attic Press Archive, for an early discussion of sexism and sexual inequality in education, where there is a pamphlet entitled “Education Widens the Gap between the Sexes” published by the Education Workshop, Irishwomen United, Dublin (1975, 21pp.). Files BL/F/AP/1341–1351, Attic Press Archive, contain various articles and booklets on the issues of sexism in education.


5 Paper given at the Visions and Voices Conference, San Francisco State University, 1988.

6 The stated aims and objectives of the Women’s Studies Centre are (Byrne, 1996: 84): to provide students with an understanding of women’s studies and as an academic discipline; to introduce students to feminist theory as a conceptual and analytical framework; to introduce students to alternative teaching methods; to demonstrate the importance of personal experience in learning and problem-solving; to introduce students to a wide range of study and learning skills; to provide students with a thorough understanding of the position of women in diverse cultures and periods in history; to gain insights into the construction of inequality and the oppression of women; and to explore the representation of women in literature, in art and the media from Ireland and abroad.

7 Anne Byrne and Ronit Lentin have recently conducted a survey of feminist academics. See Byrne (2000).